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ABSTRACT

A project is planned to explore how low income youth of color experience their employment in the highly segregated neighborhoods of museums and where people of color are in museums as visitors and employees. The researcher will use personal experiences with young people of color directed to the institutions through foundationally and federally subsidized service learning and employment training programs and experience museums first and most thoroughly as service workers, more often using museums to gain employment skills than to explore art, science, or other products of culture. Black employees at one museum regularly refer to it as the "plantation," since few of them work on the research and exhibit development floors; most are not vertically mobile. At another museum, youth speak of blatant and covert racism. The project will gather testimonies of participants in youth programs. Questions have four foci: inclusion/exclusion, social reproduction, representation, and youth. The literature provides an overview of museum history and professional culture; role of power and privilege in institutions; few historical preservation efforts as they relate to the history of African Americans; and marginalized groups of youth as creators of cultural products that are valuable aesthetically and as documents of nondominant group experiences. Methods will include field research, observation, interviews, interpretation of site documents, and collection of historical and demographic information. (Contains 16 references) (YLB)

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Your Exhibit Text, My Exhibited Body:
A Critical Look at Youth Employment Programs in Museums

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Introduction

Placing Myself:

I am a cultural worker and activist first, and a student somewhere after that. I have worked in museums for a decade, developing and evaluating exhibits on diverse topics, from African natural history to grandparents in Chicago. In each of my museum workplaces I've been struck by their great potential and also their wasted opportunities. Museums are full of the best of what creative humans have dreamt and built, and also stolen. Museums tell stories that are beautiful and evocative, and also lies or myths of the sort found in textbooks and on public monuments. My activism springs from the kind of hope many have described--hope that implies work towards change. I think museums are important and belonging to us all, can be reformed.

This is a paper in progress, which grew out of a qualitative research class project and which may end as my dissertation a couple of years from now. I'm far from it now, but I want this project to become a fully ethnographic account of a museum youth employment milieu, with a twist: In addition to exploring the employment program, I want to work with the youth to re-write the museum text, addressing these kinds of questions--How do the youth workers interpret the exhibits? and What stories lie below the surface of the official stories? And then looking at the youth employment program closely, I'm asking, When does work lead to better work, and what does it lead to when it doesn't? Here's the beginning of the story, followed by a proposal for further research:

Placing Teens[1]

A beanpole lean boy called Art Johnson strides into a room full of tinier boys and girls tumbling over rugged blue and red bins full of plastic snap-together blocks. His legs are longer than two toddlers stacked on top of each other, and his skin is browner than the softly burnished and worn wooden benches that several even more worn parents are sitting on, around the edges of the carpeted block building area. This boy, on his first day at a children's museum in a major midwestern city, is exploring his employment options. Today, the whole museum is his potential

[1] All names of teens and museum workers in the main body of the text are pseudonyms.

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workplace, and he was told that in the end one exhibit will be his specialty--he will learn everything about it, from stocking it with supplies to answering visitors' content-related questions. Later Art will tell his new supervisor that this "building for babies" exhibit is his first choice. He loves babies, and he knows them--he has lots of little cousins. He also thinks he might enjoy being a teacher someday, and wants a chance to explore explaining ideas to children. Imagining beyond what he sees, his eyes focus on some far place while he explains his affinity for the exhibit, and later when he settles down to a plate of macaroni and greens at home after his first day, he tells his mother about his choice and pleasure and great luck.

The next morning the supervisor asks her assistant into her office and gives her a list of job placements. Fifteen teenagers, all African American and Latino, will start working at the museum today, and it's the assistant's job to tell them where they will be working, and how to learn what they need to know to do the job right. The assistant, a twenty-four year old black woman named Riki Jones, has been at the museum for six years. She got her start at the museum through an "employment skills" program called Building Careers, similar to the program bringing in the new fifteen today, when she was a senior in high school. Soon Riki was working at the museum upwards of twenty hours a week during the school year, and often over forty hours in the summer. She signed on to work in every part of the museum, from the gift shop to the reception desk, but especially loved working in an exhibit about bubbles. That exhibit was her high point at the museum, and she was proud of her work: She mixed the bubble solution, "Correct, to make it where the kids can make bubbles perfectly every time around." After a few years, and many applications, she got the job she's in now, working up from minimum wage to $7.50 an hour.

Riki's supervisor, a forty-year-old second generation Irish American named Maggie Shea, moves down the list, reading her placements out loud: *Lana--The front desk. Rashaun--I'm putting him in the TV studio. Can you go over the cameras with him at the end of the day? Mario--He's assigned to read books during parent-child hour. Art--he can stock the supply shelves in the north supply closet.* Riki's head pops up. *Remember? He's the teen who asked to be in the preschool exhibit. I told him that he'd get his first choice.* Maggie's lips curl down at the edges, she takes a small step back. *We can't put him in preschool--he'd scare the kids.*

Two years after this incident, and four years after I ended my employment at this museum, Riki clenches her fists as Art's story explodes from her. "The little subtle things that Maggie and some of the supervisors did to that guy--I really think that's the reason he quit." Art was banned from the preschool exhibit and they wouldn't let him work in the store, either. Riki asked, "Why is he always scheduled in places where he has to use his hands, or he has his back turned to someone?" The supervisor's answers were contradictory and frustrating, from denial--"We don't treat him any differently than anyone else."--to murmuring about Art's personal qualities: He's so

big, he lives in the housing projects, he doesn't really know how to articulate his words, he's threatening. Riki countered, "It was just crazy because he was like a soft teddy bear."

As we sat in her kitchen, Riki remembered her earliest years at the museum, recounting moments of potential and pride. Describing her first day: "I loved it! Right there when I got there...Coming from where I come from, you don't meet that many people outside of your own culture...I met people from all over the world [at the museum]--I met stars, I met people that I liked, I met people that will come back and remember me...I love working at the museum." And then she draws back: "Mmm, well, I like working with the public." Today, talking with Riki, I remember similar feelings and experiences well: The museum was fine and promising, and treacherous, too. I worked there with Riki for two years, and then I quit and returned to school. I'm still a student, two years into a doctoral program, and Riki is still at the museum--enjoying her increased salary, but disillusioned and making plans to move on. We are together at my request, to record and mull over old stories, as I begin this project exploring the experiences of young people working in museums through employment and job training programs.

Like Riki and Art, young people of color increasingly discover museums as new workers involved with the day-to-day operations of cultural institutions they may never have entered as visitors. Directed to the institutions through foundationally and federally subsidized service learning and employment training programs, low income youth of color may experience museums first and most thoroughly as service workers, more often using museums to gain employment skills than to explore art, science, or other products of culture.

Museums, too, use young people. The youth employment program that hired Riki required a commitment of at least twenty hours each week from the program's fifteen teens, even during the school year. These teens, all black and Latino, provided the youth museum with anywhere from 300 to over 500 labor hours weekly. The teens were (and still are) paid a minimum wage (and given no benefits), fully offset by the city of Chicago and a corporate sponsor. This part-time no-cost labor force plays no minor role in a museum with less than forty full-time staff, all but two of whom were white at the time of these incidents.

Employment: Who Does What?

While working for Field Museum of Natural History I learned that black employees regularly refer to that institution as the "plantation." Few people of color work on the research and exhibit development floors. Instead, the staff most resembling the majority populations of Chicago ride the elevators down to the basement levels where they pick up brooms, punch timecards, and wash dishes. At Field Museum, during my employment there, most brown and black employees were not vertically mobile--they could be nearly sure that they would never craft exhibit content, but would remain responsible for housekeeping, security, and kitchen work in the lowest and

"darkest" parts of the building. While the exhibits in this "natural history" museum tell stories about the cultures of origin for many of Chicago's inhabitants, the living descendants of those ancestral cultures have little to do with telling them. And there are rarely opportunities for updating--culture is presented in the museum as a global, static, time-locked concept.

I worked at Field Museum as an exhibit developer for the science sections of an exhibit about Africa. The director of the project, an African American woman with a community organizing background--both unusual qualifications for a museum worker--developed a long-term education program that spanned the life of the entire five year exhibit project. The program, funded by the MacArthur Foundation precisely because of its consistent and lengthy vision, brought the same group of thirty students to the Museum every month--for five years--to learn about Africa and museums.

During that time the racially and economically diverse group of young people, drawn from six public and private schools around Chicago, grew to "own" the museum in a way that I had not experienced before. They wielded their own "employee" passes, moving from floor to floor "shadowing" museum staff, and eventually planned and built a small exhibit about Africa. Their involvement with the program was scheduled to end when the major Africa exhibit opened, and their experience was supposed to culminate in paid docent employment. The program was designed to move them closer to the most powerful museum jobs--those of the storytellers, the shapers of the public narrative, the cultural emissaries. The prospects were delicious, but the director left the project before the exhibit opened, and without institutional support and vision the school program fell apart. Those thirty youth had a rich five years, but lost an important opportunity to begin their working lives as cultural employees. An even greater loss: Nationwide there are few museum professionals of color, and even fewer "culturally specific" museums to function as stepping stones to professional employment in the field. Addressing this issue, Helen Valdez, co-director of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago, noted that in 1992 there were only fifteen Mexican American museum professionals in the United States--and nearly half of those had gotten their start at her institution. In other words, professional level museum training and employment opportunities for people of color are rare outside of culturally specific institutions.

Another job: this time at a midwestern children's museum. Here a small and nearly all-white staff sought and served a majority rich, white and suburban population. This museum also had a youth program, but one more officially sanctioned and well funded than Field Museum's. The goal of this program was different from the Field's too--program descriptions said it was intended to give low income youth part-time employment, providing them with job skills and work experience.

Shortly after I started the job, I was assigned to "mentor" a young woman named Riki, an employee of four years, hired through the youth program (called the "education assistant"

program). During conversations with Riki, I learned that the education assistants were in the middle of a simmering protest. The main issues were opportunities for advancement, improved skill learning opportunities, and respect. Riki asked me how to write a memo. I showed her the format, and the youth drafted one addressing a variety of issues. From that memo:

- Hold us to our job descriptions, we are not janitors or maids.
- Please do not talk down to us, especially in front of visitors.
- We would like to be considered part of the team at the museum, not merely the lowest level on the organizational chart.

At the time I didn't know the details of the struggle, but Riki told me later, "We sent the memo to [our supervisor] and she chewed our asses out. 'You're not supposed to write a memo like that. In any other job, you would've been fired.'" The employment curriculum at the museum was conservative, top-down, and non-democratic. Even so, the museum program offered a window onto jobs that many urban youth are simply unaware of, and many of the youth employees, like Art, hoped that starting small would be the start of something big. After several years of part-time, no-benefits employment, Riki , counseled new youth workers otherwise. In her words: "I felt like I was helping the teens that were coming into the museum...getting them to understand not to get set on being in one spot in the museum, to want to move up, but to always... look beyond the museum. Don't look at this as your life time job, because it's not, it's not for that."

In addition to those disappointing job prospects and employment conditions, the youth also complained that museum supervisory staff did not adequately respond to negative and racialized visitor responses to the youth--in fact some staff seemed to have similar feelings: In one instance a supervisor rearranged a work schedule, separating a Latino girl and a black boy (who were friends) after telling them, "I don't like biracial relationships."

Through discussions with the museum's education assistants I came to understand some of the ways that these youthful cultural workers experienced their roles in the museum. They spoke movingly of blatant and covert racism they experienced while they worked "on the floor"--white fathers who shooed them away from white children, other visitors' derogatory comments: "It's getting a little dark in here," one parent was heard saying when she spotted a group of youth workers. This museum, like most others nationally, serve majority white, wealthy and well-educated audiences--in 1993 the museum's visiting audience was 78% white, in a city nearly seventy percent black and Latino. For comparison, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago reported that in 1997 88% of their visitors were Caucasian (sic), 4% were Hispanic/Latino, 3%

were Asian/Pacific Islander and 2% were African American. In this context, the bodies of young, mostly black and Latino teenagers are "exhibited" as "foreign matter" and experienced as dangerous and unless providing service, undesirable. Riki's description: "I've never seen any kid walk up to me, or anyone of color or another background, and just start talking to them, 'cause their parents would be like, 'NO, no, no, don't talk to them', or they'll tell them, 'You don't have to clean up, that's what they're here for." She gestured towards herself.

The employment program, supported by foundations and local government, was arguably not providing the youth with many real benefits other than a minimum salary, and some new, though not all pleasant, experiences. The youth, on the other hand, were vitally important to the museum, performing indispensable labor for low wages. The youth were symbolically important too--during my employment there, museum directors made sure that education assistants were visible in promotional materials, a move that could be read as an attempt to fabricate the diverse audience the museum is unable to attract, or perhaps uninterested in developing. The Museum touted its exhibits about Africa and Mexico, claiming a "multicultural" authenticity that its increasingly white audience belied[2]. But the youth museum workers, most with ancestral ties to those parts of the world, were frozen into museum positions with the least power, and no connection to content-shaping--to telling the stories of their own living cultures.

Closing, and Beginning

Here are the bones of my project: I am looking back at one of my earlier work sites by gathering the testimonies of participants in the youth program from that place--interviewing folks--and I am building a relationship with another museum's youth program. The programs are very different--in the museum I described earlier, the youths' labor is integral, at the other the youth visit on Saturdays and do very little work, but make a lot of art. I have many questions--many things I hope to discover while listening and looking in these institutions, like:

- How do low-income youth of color experience their employment in the highly segregated--racially, economically and educationally--neighborhoods of museums?
- Where are people of color in museums, both as visitors and as employees?
- How do the texts used in museums, from exhibit labels to employment manuals and even responses to memos, reinforce or subvert social systems of inclusion and exclusion, dominance and suppression?

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[2] In 1993 the marketing department of the Chicago Children's Museum published the results of a two year audience survey, which showed that 78% of visitors in 1992 were white, with declining numbers of black and Latino visitors over that two year period. At the time, Chicago's population was nearly 70% black and Latino.

- How are museums related to broad educational projects--for example to public education, and the creation and reinforcement of common cultural understandings?
- What role does youth job preparation have in that context? And what jobs and job conditions are we talking about?

Museums--repositories of public culture and artifacts, and supported by common sources of funding--should be accountable to a public defined in the broadest sense. What are the various ways that people--young and old, economically and educationally diverse, reflective of our thick soup culture--would choose to use museums, if given such a choice? I am interested in helping to shift the focus of museums--perhaps from the somewhat static and dominant culture reifying joints they are now, to more critically oriented community service providers. What would this look like? Field Museum of Natural History's Africa Exhibit recreates a Cameroonian museum that functions (in Cameroon, not Field Museum) dually as a storage place and a "lending library," from which community members remove, use, and then return objects of great cultural significance. The exhibit developers who offered the visiting public this story may have been prompting questions like: What would museums in the United States look like if we collectively redefined them? Could they be used as libraries? As places to heal us from our national ahistoricity? Or could they become cultural communication centers ringing with debating, singing, reading, and praying voices? Youth working in museums may have insights into these institutions and their potential, and fresher visions for museums, than more "invested" staff. What roles for museums will the teens envision? Will museum staffs ask the youth to look up and dream in their roles as young workers, or simply put them on elevators bound for the basement?.

Next Steps

My questions have four central foci: Inclusion/exclusion (museums as segregated communities), Social reproduction (museums as sites of hegemonic cultural authority), Representation (museums as media/representation locations/displayers of difference) and Youth (museums as opportunities to learn, to work, to hang out). These are not tightly discrete topic areas: There are obviously overlaps, and I could have named them differently--for example, perhaps what I am calling social reproduction would be more accurately called cultural production. I may shift my own focus within these categories, add others as my project moves forward, or drop some, as I learn more.

Review of Literature
Museums--The Scene

Looking for an overview of museum history and professional culture I turn to a recent text by Lisa Roberts (1997): *From Knowledge To Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum.* This author has written a thoroughly researched and widely referenced book that chronicles shifting conceptions of museums over time. She is interested in constructivist and postmodern thought, and applies these paradigms to museum trends, writing, for instance, that knowledge is produced and contextual. She is less interested in looking at museums with a post-structuralist critical lens. Rather than deconstructing museums and their role in the production of cultural forms and information, including segregation and racial isolation, a topic of central importance to my focus, she accepts with few questions museums' social place and function.

As a museum educator (she is currently director of conservatories for the Chicago Park District), she is in favor of increased roles for educators in museums, and perhaps reflecting her own status as a highly degreed (Ph.D.) museum worker, she is also a proponent of what she calls "[g]rowing professionalism...and professional-training requirements" (2) for similarly employed individuals. She doesn't address the question of youth employment in museums directly, but her calls for increased levels of education, as opposed to more on-the-job training, seem to close off potential for museums to hire and promote from their youth employment programs, rejecting those programs as potential sites-of-entry for people of color and other individuals not traditionally found in museums.

Perhaps unintentionally, the book points to the way hegemonic assumptions (in this case Eurocentric) shape museum content. Organized around the development of an exhibit about Linnaeus for the Chicago Botanic Garden, the book explores the relationship of museums to four topics: entertainment, empowerment, experience, and ethics. Roberts describes her study as an ethnographic analysis, and uses literary criticism as well as historical survey in developing her themes, but unfortunately has neglected taking a deconstructionist look at her own topic. Using that lens, she may have asked, "Why an exhibit about Linnaeus?" Reflecting her implicit rejection of the postmodern/feminist/critical call for inclusion of multiple and marginal voices and discourses, she neglects to include the words of the six member exhibit development team in the book, muting her potentially rich ethnographic study of an institutional culture.

Roberts does not appear to have considered looking beyond traditional venues for historical material. For example, she documents the history of museums as displayers of "curiosities" often including people of color, but does not explore writings by African Americans to discover historic commentary on that topic. I would love to know if W.E.B. DuBois, for instance, ever explored the ethics of displaying living African people in museum cases. And again, she neglects the voices of youth of color working at the Botanic Garden on any of these questions. Ironically, the Botanic

Garden has a thriving youth employment program[3], which focuses on bringing low-income youth of color to that institution.

The author notes that museums have been pulled into debates about "...changing definitions of knowledge" (56) and authority, but avoids discussion of how museums uphold systems of power. She warns against the "relativism" that threatens to result from a too-literal or perhaps liberal acceptance of the multiple meanings visitors assign to their experiences in museums. Rather than address head-on issues of structure and power, the author calls for "making exhibits [that] communicate clearly and effectively" to "clarify exhibit messages" (146), as if the problems with museums rest simply in relating these messages more effectively. She is clearly committed to convincing readers of the importance of a focus on education for museums, and to increasing the role of educators in museums, but does not ask, "Education for whom, about what, to what end?"

While there is much of value in Roberts' tome, my own interests are grounded in critical postmodern theory. Any attempt to examine culture-shaping and reflecting institutions such as museums and schools is only partially complete without using critical theoretical tools. Next, on the tail of Roberts' calls for clarity, I turn to a theoretician who wants to "trouble" that desire. Two papers by Patti Lather are especially useful when wrestling with the questions that I am eager to explore with this inquiry: *Troubling Clarity: The Politics of Accessible Language*, and *Deconstructing/Deconstructive Inquiry: The Politics of Knowing and Being Known.*

Language and Power-- Deconstructing The Unseen

Revealing her debts to critical, feminist, and poststructuralist theory, Lather asks the kinds of questions that make me excited--about the role of power and privilege in institutions, including those which benefit her. She questions postmodern discourse while using it--this is a primary aim of Deconstructing/Deconstructive Inquiry: the Politics of Knowing and Being Known. Here she explores and critiques some goals for postmodern work: to de-center and interrupt the authorial voice, and to move from an analytic mode towards something that "reveals the artifice" (156) of research and report. She draws attention to the created aspect of her writing by playing with words, breaking them open, revealing the mutability of their meaning. She leaves room for the reader to create or assign meaning as well (sometimes because her writing is so dense that "her meaning" is obscured), which serves the purpose of revealing the contextuality of meanings.

Lather is aware of the potential for postmodernism to become a master narrative--another oppressive, academicized and ultimately apathy-inducing discourse--and urges us to question our

[3]The Chicago area has three youth employment programs with this explicit focus, all part of the national program, Youth ALIVE, funded by the Reader's Digest Foundation, according to Darchelle Garner, Director of Community Services at the Chicago Children's Museum (conversation, November, 1997).

theories and stay experimental. She reminds researchers to examine how our "interventions" can "render people passive" (163), and become part of the "technologies of normalization" even when our work is "praxis-oriented" (167). These insights are important, and point to a critique of Roberts. As museums mute potentially powerful discourses of marginalized groups and viewpoints, they reinforce the extant "master narratives. Roberts became part of that system of oppression and "normalization" as she muted the voices of these same groups at the Botanic Garden while crafting her ethnographic study. But how else can our research, the results of inquiry, look?

Lather's inclusion of several examples of what she calls "counter-disciplinary practices in educational inquiry" (163) in the final section of this piece, provides us with some answers to that question. These "emancipatory projects" challenge traditional research goals and methods in various ways--defusing the authorial presence by merging the three writer's voices into one; by broadening the boundaries of what is considered data to include letters and dialogue; by self-consciously and self-critically blurring the genres of poetry and "non-fiction." Lather explores this theme further in her paper *Troubling Clarity: The Politics of Accessible Language*, examining the ways that the charge of inaccessibility has been leveled at postmodernist work generally and at critical and feminist work specifically, and explores the Lacanian argument that clear writing is afforded the status of truth in common sense and populist calls for "plain-speaking" and that this "sense of clarity" is an anti-populist tool in persuasive propaganda, noting, "[f]or Lacan, not being understood is an ethical imperative" (528). Applying this thought to museum texts, I'm reminded of Robert's call for "exhibits that communicate clearly." Using Lather's argument, Roberts' desire for clarity could be a way to mask the inherently complicated field that museums occupy. "Troubling" the wish for uncritical "clear" communication may be the first step towards a challenge to hegemony of representation and structural exclusion.

Lather also writes about the notion of "giving voice," pointing to it as a particular problem in Western ethnographic traditions, with vast and often realized potential for manipulation, violation and betrayal. Resulting from her work with a group of HIV infected women, Lather's book (with Chris Smithies) *Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS*, includes a multiplicity of discourses, including "voice," interview data, poetry, drawings, sidebars with information about HIV/AIDS, commentary subtexts drawn from her research journals and conversations with her co-researcher, and popular culture inter-texts about angels. The book details the author's imperative that the book be widely accessible, but also their goal of achieving a difficult clarity. Inspired by this work, I hope to craft a layered, dense, multiply representational and always unfinished piece of research during my project. The result should be shaped as it grows, through my constant inquiry-driven literature and life gleanings, and by my work with the youth and other staff in the museum/s I explore.

Lather's work is challenging: difficult to read, thought provoking, sometimes infuriatingly complex. Still, she makes the important calls, I think, for self-critique, for examination of deep and disturbing threads leading back to systems of oppression. In the end, she asks, "What use is this theoretical speculation?" and answers her own question: It gives her the courage to continue, and some hope that she and other academics will "be of use when the old stories will not do" (541). There is no longer any clear path to follow, and no path better than the uncharted one. This message is one I will carry with me as I wend my way down the work path, simultaneously forging my life path. "Uncharted" may be scary, but better, too: The mapping is the inquiry.

Museum Others--What Remains Unseen

Some theoretical terrain seems to be still largely unmapped. A clear critique of the ways that people of color, and other members of non-dominant groups have been and are displayed, seen, and often unseen in museums, is hard to find. An essay by Fath Davis Ruffins, *Mythos, memory, and history: African American preservation efforts, 1820-1990*, (1992) provides an analysis of historical "preservation efforts" as they relate to the history of African Americans in the United States. She notes the historical lack of interest by white scholars in searching for this history, and the importance of black institutions like colleges and museums, as preservation locations for this particular history. Ruffins writes, "patterns of preservation are not random...[and] reflect the preservers' interpretations of what was important about the African American past" (509). Just as important to note is that what remains unpreserved and unremarked on is also significant, and reflective of what researchers value.

Ruffins begins by defining and differentiating between memory, mythos and history, each ways of interpreting the past, and each emphasizing different evidence: Memory, lived experience, history, academic experience and mythos, encompassing something larger than an individual's memory, is the "larger narrative...of a people." By using history to stimulate and manipulate memory, museums create or reinforce mythos that satisfies the dominant group's needs, often by ignoring some histories to emphasize others. As in Lisa Roberts' central and unquestioning acceptance of an exhibit about Linnaeus--remarkable in a book that "uses" deconstructive theory in other areas--what is excluded is often not explicitly addressed.

Ruffins details aspects of a 19th century African American mythos, or "interior views" (514)--a focus on self reliance, roles as "truth-tellers," a connection to enslaved and resisting biblical Hebrews, heroism--and looks at places that preserved the artifacts and documents that reinforced these views, such as private collections, churches and increasingly, African American history museums. She contrasts this with examples of what and why historically white institutions collected about Africans and African Americans, and points out that many of the initial great museums in the United States were natural history museums built around collections that

reinforced theories of Social Darwinism and polygenesis. Charged with merging the "new science," anthropology, with the already established disciplines of natural history--botany, biology and geology--these museums became the "primary purveyors of scientific racism" and were often the "primary scholarly means by which the public came into contact with 'the primitive'--that is, people of color" (523). This discussion is fascinating, and provides a context for museums that reveals the structures behind the "exhibit cases," offering some explanation for the location of African Americans, and by extension, other groups of color, in museums today.

Ruffins' piece reveals obscured historical record but would have been stronger if the voice and views of the author were more self-consciously apparent. While Ruffins attempts a distanced, traditionally academic "objective" tone, I would have valued explicit reference to her role as one of a small number of African American museum workers. Her passionate and subjective take on museum ideology in practice would have added another kind of substance and verification to this still rich article. My own research will focus on gathering these kinds of stories.

Deconstructing Othered Imagery

Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992), in *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, explores the way that prevalent imagery continues the work of conquest and domination, and is a form of discourse that can be deconstructed. He points to the political nature of this work, quoting Derrida: Deconstruction is concerned with "a complete overturning of cultural domination" (227). The book begins this project--including and dissecting some of the historically most common and in some cases still popular images of black people in Western media and popular culture. It includes research on colonialism and slave trades, starting in Europe and eventually arriving in the United States. Not so shockingly, the same stereotypes which have been applied to "othered" groups for apparently millenia--often stories about bestial humans with super-strength and abundant libido, who are happy to serve and better off with firm correction and control--are present today in various media. Pieterse points to the overabundance of images of happy "rapping," dancing and athletic black men in American media, for example.

Pieterse offers provocative and useful cautions: He warns against a narrow look for "the other," and points to the historicity of this location which shifts "according to time, location, status, gender, relationships and so on" (234). He reminds the reader that attempting to reduce the question to a discovering the images of "Self and Other" or "us and them" ignores the complexity of identity, and reinforces static dualistic relationships. While his work doesn't explore the ways that people experience "othering" he charts a myriad of forms where this occurs. A question that my project will examine is where youth of color identify the experience of being "othered" in their work in museums. I'm also interested in the related question of where othering happens in museum texts.

The book ends with this point: "Probably the single most important feature of representations of otherness is the role they play in establishing and maintaining social inequality" (234) echoing Lather's contention that (re)presentation matters. I am profoundly interested in this concept and in the corollary contention that images can provide a way to question, resist and undermine inequality. Examples of this kind of structural image-challenging work in museums are rare, but some academic attention has been paid to youth art projects that explicitly attack exclusionary notions of the role and definition of art/image/text creation

Youth Questioning Images/Imaging Questions

The product of Nicholas Paley's (1995) qualitative research project focusing on independent youth art "experiments"--a book called *Finding Art's Place: Experiments in Contemporary Education and Culture*, presents images of often marginalized groups of youth--poor and poorly educated, often of color, often urban, sometimes sexual minorities--as creators of cultural products that are valuable aesthetically and as documents of non-dominant group experiences. Drawing on postmodern and feminist theories and research methods, Paley's text combines a variety of presentation modes, from transcripts of self-and-other interviews, to diaristic jottings, to stills from video, to reactions to paintings. Most stunning though, are the included texts from videos and quotes from young artists that identify and critique their marginalization. Here, for example, are the words of teenaged video artist Sadie Benning on the importance of finding reflections of self in society: "When you're growing up, the media totally ignore gay and lesbian youth and gay people in general. When I realized my feelings were nowhere on TV or anywhere else, I shoved them way down inside myself and tried to be something else" (72).

But Paley points to, and these youth confirm, the life and even world transforming power of art-making. Again, Benning: "I just tell the truth the way I live it, and that's what all this shit [her videotapes] is about: life, art, being what you are, knowing what you like, and what you hate. So you can love and create and stand up for it, and you can hate and stand up against it" (78). For Benning, the creation of images is a way to fight back, to "stand up against" a society that oppresses through omission by crafting the "truth"-full views of herself that don't exist in the public cultural domain. A place for activist difference, that questions the structures, and the socially sanctioned ways of imaging those structures, by creating images of difference and "other" possibilities.

This work provides a model for my own, by focusing on the experience of youth involved in organized outside-school activities. Paley's explicit attempt to ground his work in the accounts of youth, his use of multiple texts, and his activist stance also inspire the shape and scope of my research. My project imagines that museums can provide opportunities to articulate difference and act for change as well--by opening up discussion of the ways that socially constructed and accepted

categories such as race are experienced and underscored in a museum environment. Further, I hope that this project will inspire youth and museum staff to think critically about the role and responsibility of museums in society.

Methodology

Design of the Study

For this project, the process of the research is as important as the "findings." I am only interested in creating and participating in research that moves all participants from silence to voice, from isolation to communion, from stillness to action, and finally, from less representation to more. I am a social justice activist first and last, and a researcher as a means to that end. Inspired by Lather's (1991) contention that research can (and should) work counter to a positivistic surveillance model, by enlisting reciprocal methods towards an emancipatory agenda, I plan to work collaboratively with museum staff and youth to shape my project.

Ristock and Pennell (1996) describe a "research as empowerment" model that feels like home to me. This model premises that "research itself can be a lived process of empowerment when it encompasses both a critical analysis of power and a reconstructing of power so that it can be used in a responsible manner" (2). As I have described in other sections of this paper, I believe that youth can creatively and critically reflect on their experiences, and that the reflexive process can help to reshape and reform those experiences. Believing also that systems of exclusion and privilege can be addressed only when they are seen (McIntosh, 1988), I hope that this project will start a process of reëvaluation that will help to create more responsive/responsible cultural institutions.

Lather (1991) offers definitions for three types of validity: *Construct*, *Face* and *Catalytic*. Accepting these, I will attempt to ensure Construct validity (Ristock and Pennell, 1996) by "recogniz[ing] and confront[ing] the theoretical traditions within which [I am] operating...willing to challenge and change them...[accepting the need for] flexibility in the research design" (50). Face validity (Ristock and Pennell, 1996) will be aspired to by 'checking [my] analyses, descriptions and conclusions" [with my project participants] (50). Finally, I will feel the project has achieved Catalytic validity (Ristock and Pennell, 1996) if the involved community of museum staff and youth feels "energized or re-oriented by the project" (50), perhaps a first step towards real systemic change.

Throughout this project I will dance between a critical, feminist interpretive approach and a grounded theory interpretive style (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Denzin, 1989, 1994), using a constant comparative inductive analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) while remaining mindful of the ways that discourses support, and deconstruction subverts, social systems (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

Methods

Informed consent will be sought from all involved museum staff, with special attention paid to explaining the project to youth workers, who will most likely be under age 18. From these

youth, two consent forms will be requested: A parental form, and a youth form. In addition, we may want to explain the project to museum visitors, on an as needed basis (as we ask them questions).

Field research: I will observe "on the museum floor" interactions between youth and museum visitors, training sessions and youth worker meetings.

Participant observation: I may suggest that I participate in both official and "unofficial" tours of the museum facilitated by the youth workers. For example, youth may be given information about an authorized version of things to say about exhibits/artworks in the museum, and they may also have their version of these tours. I might also ask them to simply tour me through the exhibits, explaining the content to me as we go. These tours could be audiotaped.

Interviews: I will ask permission to interview youth workers and their supervisory and training staff. In addition, youth workers may interview their peers about museum experiences, perhaps on specific topics, for example, their most and least liked parts of their jobs in the museum. These interviews could serve as springboards to expanded museum text evaluation, for example, by pointing to topics for further study.

Site documents: Training materials and exhibit texts will be interpreted by myself and by youth workers. In addition to analyzing training documents, youth workers may be asked to create a "running sub-text" commentary on the training materials. This sub-text will ask and answer questions like: What does this really mean? What is not being said? Why is the text written this way? How does this text match with your museum experiences? A similar approach may be used with exhibitry as well, to determine how the youth "read" displays.[4] Throughout, we will attempt to deconstruct and destabilize the texts, to better understand how they produce meanings and what ideologies those meanings reflect (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

Historical and demographic information will be gathered about the museum, the youth worker program, and youth involved in the program. In addition, some national data will be collected, to place the program and museum demographics and history in a broader context.

Research journal entries will be incorporated into the research and interpretive process. Staff and youth will be invited to share reactions to the project this way also.

Using a constant comparative (inductive theory) method, I will begin to analyze the data, working with the museum staff and youth to ensure that my interpretations are informed by theirs, and that their analysis is present in the "final" product of this project. In addition to sharing my

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[4] An example of a critical "reading" of an exhibit is given in *Opening the Museum: History and Strategies Toward a More Inclusive Institution* (1993). In this case, exhibit advisors were asked to critique an exhibit "from a multicultural point of view" (51). "The advisors made many positive remarks about the importance of the exhibit, but one person commented that it was 'hung white.' She meant that it was hung the way museum people (usually white) mount an exhibit" (51).

thought process with the museum community I work with, I will ask them to note their own separate responses to the analysis process.

Relevance

The results of this inquiry will expand understanding of the ways that youth of color experience their participation in employment training programs in historically majority culture institutions. Enhanced understanding may lead to more sensitively developed programs and employment materials. The project may also reveal ways that youth comment on and can enhance museum texts, and through this exploration prompt more youth-directed critical responses to the museum environment. Youth involvement in a critical survey of museum exhibits and other texts will yield insights into the ways that museums are perceived by those youth, and could encourage youth to participate in content-forming aspects of museum involvement.

Setting and Participants

I will seek permission to work in one local museum that participates in some form of youth employment project. Currently there are four such museums in the Chicago area: a botanic garden, a natural history museum, an arts museum, and a children's museum. Any of these will be acceptable, and I anticipate that each site will have particularities that will inform the data collection process.

At the museum site I will seek to include newer and longer-term youth workers and their immediate supervisory staff in the research project, although observations will include museum visitors as well. The work will begin with observations, journal keeping, writing, and initial meetings and interviews. The second, more collaborative and on-going piece will begin after I have become more familiar with the program, the museum, and the youth and staff, and they with me. Then we can begin to re-form the project, towards reforming the museum, together.

Findings

I anticipate that the research will yield a body of knowledge that can be used by museums, youth-focused organizations, school-to-work programs, and educators. In addition, I am hopeful that the project will be immediately useful to the staff and youth workers at the museum involved in this project. Because I think this topic is rich, with a number of "branches" to related topics (broadly and selectively, critical race theory, organizational theory and gender studies), this initial study may fan out, becoming a core study for my dissertation work.

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